

## Substance use and Other Problems Among Youth in Foster and Relative Care

In the school year 2005-06, the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), and its companion statewide Biennial California Student Survey, included a question for 9th and 11th graders assessing living arrangements (“Where do you live?”). The question was designed to enable school districts to assess and respond to health risks and resilience among students who did not live with a parent but rather with another relative, a friend, in foster care, or were homeless (living in a shelter, car, hotel). This question was subsequently deleted because the percentages of students that reported they were not living with a parent were so low that the data were not useful to school districts. However, during this single year 318 school districts with secondary schools across the state administered the CHKS, yielding a sample of 148,869 9th and 119,817 11th graders. Although this sample cannot be considered representative of all youth statewide, its large size and geographic spread makes the dataset the best available for studying how youth differ according to their living arrangements. This factsheet summarizes the differences in substance use and other risk behaviors or problems among three living-arrangement groups:

- **Parent Home Youth (PHY)** — those that selected “parent’s home,” 94% of the sample (137,048 9th graders and 110,274 11th graders).
- **Relative Home Youth (RHY)** — those that selected “other relative’s home,” 3.5% of the sample (5,122 9th and 4,240 11th).
- **Foster Care Youth (FCY)** — those that selected “foster home, group home, or awaiting placement,” 0.5% of the sample (769 9th and 563 11th).

The RHY group was included in the analysis in order

to decrease the possibility of excluding students living with a relative in a foster-care situation but not aware of it. However, there is no way of determining how many youth who selected this option were foster youth.

Compared to Parent Home Youth, the Foster Care Youth reported much higher rates of substance abuse, poor school attendance and grades, and more violence-related behaviors, as well as more harassment and depression risk. They also were more likely to be low in caring adult relationships and total environmental assets. Relative Home Youth tended to fall in the mid-range. The group differences were greater in 9th grade than 11th, and they increased with level of substance use involvement. The results underscore the need to direct greater attention, services, and developmental supports to youth in foster care.

### Sample Characteristics

The Foster Care Youth in this survey were less likely to be White and Asian than the Parent Home Youth, about equally likely to be Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders or Hispanic, and about three times more likely to be American Indian and Black. They also were somewhat more likely to be multi-ethnic. RHY percentages for most ethnic/racial groups tended to fall between the foster and parent groups except that RHY were more likely to be Hispanic and less likely to be White than either of the other groups, which likely reflects the prevalence of extended families among Hispanics. FCY and RHY were also more likely to be older. In 9th grade, 50% of FCY and 40% of RHY were 15-years of age or older compared to 27% of PHY. In 11th grade, 39% of FCY and 34% of RHY were 17- or 18-years-old, compared to 25% of PHY. As would be expected, Foster Care Youth

were six times more likely to report changing residence two or more times in the past year (38% vs 6% in 9th and 28% vs 4% in 11th), with RHY in the mid range (18%-19%). There were no meaningful differences in terms of gender.

## Substance Use

In 9th grade, Foster Care Youth were at least twice as likely as Parent Home Youth to report most indicators of substance use. For several heavy substance use indicators, FCY percentages were four or more times higher. Relative Home Youth tend to report rates in between, generally closer to the Foster Care Youth but sometimes closer to the PHY (e.g., current use of methamphetamine, inhalants, and psychedelics, as well as lifetime use of ecstasy two or more times). In 11th grade, differences in substance use (especially alcohol) tended to be smaller than in 9th grade, although FCY and RHY still exceeded the Parent Home Youth. Still, heavy use rates were generally about 1.5 to twice as great.

- **Alcohol Use.** Regular current alcohol use (on 3 or more of the past 30 days) was twice as high among FCY than PHY in 9th grade (18% vs 9%), but differences were slight in 11th (20% vs 16%). RHY differed little from FCY.
- **Marijuana Use and Binge Drinking.** Differences increased for regular current marijuana use and binge drinking, by a factor of 2.5 in 9th grade and 1.5 in 11th. For marijuana, the FCY percentage was 17% vs 7% for PHY in 9th grade and 16% vs 9% in 11th. For regular binge drinking, the rates were 13% FCY vs 5% PHY in 9th and 14% vs 9% in 11th. RHY were in the mid-range in 9th grade but equivalent to FCY in 11th.
- **Other Drug Use.** For use of other drugs, the differences increased further. Among 9th-grade FCY, current methamphetamine use was over five times higher than among PHY; inhalant use was three times higher; and LSD/psychedelics, ten times higher. In 11th grade, FCY rates across substances were higher by a factor of about three to four, but

RHY rates were closer to PHY. Use on more than one occasion of prescription painkillers was twice as high in 9th grade (16% vs 8%) and for ecstasy it was five times higher (11% vs 2%). In 11th grade, painkiller rates were not that much higher among FCY than PHY but for ecstasy percentages were still almost four times higher (11% vs 3%).

- **Use Intent.** In 9th grade, FCY were 2.5 times as likely to report that they liked to drink alcohol until they are really drunk (13% vs 5%) and 3.5 times as likely to usually get very high when they used drugs (18% vs 5%). In 11th grade, similar percentages of FCY reported that they liked to get drunk and high (13% and 21%, respectively), about twice as high as the PHY (7% and 9%).
- **Frequent Intoxication.** FCY are three times more likely than PHY to have been “very drunk or sick from drinking alcohol” seven or more times in 9th grade (15% vs 5%) and twice as likely in 11th (19% vs 10%). Similarly, FCY were over three times more likely to have been high or loaded on drugs seven or more times (25% vs 7%) and twice as likely in 11th (30% and 16%).
- **Intoxicated at School.** FCY were over four times more likely than PHY to have been drunk or high at school three or more times in 9th grade (18% vs 4%) and 2.3 times in 11th (21% vs 9%). The RHY were in the mid-range at 9% and 16%, respectively. Any substance use at school means willingness to take serious risks, but doing so frequently signifies both heavy substance use involvement and possible estrangement from school (since expulsion would be the usual result of being caught).
- **Drinking and Driving.** FCY and RHY in 11th grade were 1.8 times more likely than PHY to have driven a vehicle after drinking or been in a vehicle driven by a friend after drinking on three or more occasions (18% for FCY and RHY vs 12% for PHY). Differences were even greater among 9th graders, even though they are well under the age of first driving. FCY percentages were twice those of PHY (19% vs 9%), with RHY in the midrange (at 14%).

- **Use-related Problem and Dependency Indicators.** In 9th grade, FCY were twice as likely as PHY to report two or more problems from AOD use (18% vs 9%) and two or more dependency-related indicators (15% vs 7%), with RHY at the mid-range at 11% and 13%. In 11th grade, group differences narrowed but both the FCY and RHY were higher at 19%-22% than PHY at 15% (both behaviors).

### Other Risk Behaviors and Problems

Foster Care Youth also reported higher percentages of school problems and violence-related behaviors, as well as victimization, lack of safety, and symptoms of depression.

- **School Problems.** Ninth-grade FCY are four times more likely than their PHY peers to have skipped school or classes more than once a week within the last 12 months (15% vs 4%). FCY were twice as likely to report poor grades (C's and D's or lower). In 11th grade, FCY rates for both were about twice as high as PHY (17% vs 9% for truancy and 24% vs 13% for poor grades). Relative Home Youth percentages were marginally lower than FCY (e.g., 14% for truancy and 22% for poor grades in 11th grade).
- **Violence-related Behaviors.** Ninth-grade FCY were four times more likely than PHY to have carried a gun to school (16% vs 4%). They were over twice as likely to have been in more than one physical fight at school in the past 12 months (29% vs 12%) and to be a current gang member (19% vs 8%). Group differences were about the same among 11th graders, but prevalence rates were lower.
- **Harassment.** About four in ten FCY reported experiencing hate-crime harassment for reasons of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or disability, about 1.5 times higher than PHY (45% vs 28% in 9th and 39% vs 25% in 11th). They were also about twice as likely to have been afraid of being beaten up at school two or more times in the past 12 months (14% vs 8% in 9th and 11% vs 5% in 11th). On these indicators, RHY percentages again fell in between but closer to PHY.

- **School Safety.** One sixth of FCY in 9th grade felt unsafe or very unsafe at school, over twice the percentage of PHY (7%). In 11th grade, percentages for both groups dropped to 10% FCY and 6% PHY. Among Relative Home Youth, the percentages fell in between at 9% in 9th grade and 8% in 11th.
- **Depression Risk.** They were also 1.5 times more likely to report feeling so sad and hopeless for two weeks or more that they stopped doing some usual activities, such as going to school, work, or recreational activities. RHY percentages were only slightly lower than RHY.

### Caring Adult Relationships and Total Environmental Assets

The CHKS Resilience and Youth Development contains three three-item scales measuring environmental assets in the school and community that are used to generate Total Asset Scores for each domain. These assets are the developmental supports provided youth that research has linked to positive academic and social outcomes and low involvement in risk behaviors. The three subscales measure caring adult relationships, high expectations from adults, and opportunities given for meaningful participation.

- **Total Assets.** Among 9th graders, Foster Care Youth, followed closely by Relative Home Youth, had higher percentages than Parent Home Youth for being Low in Total Assets in both the school (26% and 25% vs 20%, respectively) and the community (20% & 16% vs 11%). Foster Care Youth were about 1.5 times more likely to be Low in having caring adult relationships in their lives.
- **Caring Adults Relationship.** For having a caring relationship in the school, 25% of 9th-grade FCY were classified as Low compared to 20% of RHY and 17% of PHY. In the community, Low percentages in 9th grade were 1.7 times as high among FCY at 19% compared to PHY at 11%, with RHY in the mid-range at 15%. In contrast, there were no meaningful group differences in 11th grade.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Compared to youth living with a parent, youth in foster care and, to lesser extent, youth living in the care of a relative are at elevated risk of substance use, poor school attendance and grades, and violence-related behavior. They are also more likely to be victims of harassment, to feel less safe at school, to have fewer caring adult relationships and total assets in the school and community, and to experience incapacitating feelings of sadness and hopelessness (depression risk). One area where further research is warranted is how higher harassment and feelings of depression, and fewer assets, are related to higher risk-behavior involvement among foster youth.

The higher rates of substance use among FCY and RHY partly may be due to their older age for grade, as levels of substance use increase markedly with age. But most other indicators related to school problems, violence, victimization, and depression are not nearly as age sensitive. For most measures, the percentages reported by PHY in 9th and 11th grade did not vary greatly. Another factor that needs to be taken into consideration is the

high level of transience among FCY, as transience is a known risk factor for substance use.

The smaller group differences in 11th grade than 9th are likely related to some degree to higher rates of leaving regular schools among youth in foster care. In this process, their poorer school attendance and grades, lack of caring adult relationships and other environmental assets, and their higher rates of substance use, violence, and victimization at school undoubtedly play a role.

Overall, the results of this analysis indicate that youth in foster care or living with a relative, although a relatively small segment of the student population, are at elevated risk of multiple problems and need to be targeted for comprehensive and supportive prevention and intervention services. That Foster Care Youth in 9th grade report the lowest levels of total assets and caring adult relationships of all groups in both grades, and even FCY in 11th grade, points to the need to provide them more caring and supportive environments early in their lives.

### Table of Key Results

	9th			11th		
	PHY	RHY	FCY	PHY	RHY	FCY
<b>Demographic &amp; Academic Variables</b>						
Skip school/classes once a week or more often	4	9	15	9	14	17
Grades C's/D's or less	14	23	29	13	22	24
Change Residence 2 or more times a year	6	19	38	4	18	28
<b>Alcohol &amp; Drug Use Prevalence</b>						
<b>Current Use (Past 30 Days)</b>						
• Alcohol, 3+ days	9	14	18	16	20	20
• Marijuana, 3+ days	7	11	18	9	14	16
• Binge drinking, 3+ days	5	8	13	9	13	14
• Methamphetamines (any)	2	3	11	2	4	5
• Inhalants (any)	4	6	12	2	4	9
• LSD/psychedelics (any)	1	3	10	2	3	7
<b>Lifetime (Ever)</b>						
Prescription painkillers (OxyContin etc.), 2+ times	8	11	16	14	18	19

## Table of Key Results

	9th			11th		
	PHY	RHY	FCY	PHY	RHY	FCY
Ecstasy, 2+ times	2	3	11	3	6	11
<b>Heavy Substance Use Indicators</b>						
Very drunk/sick from alcohol, 7+ times	5	8	15	10	14	19
Ever “high/loaded” on drug, 7+ times	7	14	25	16	24	30
Usually gets very high when uses drugs	5	10	18	9	14	21
Likes to drink alcohol until gets really drunk	5	8	13	7	9	13
Drunk/high on school property, 3+ times	4	9	18	9	16	21
<b>Substance Use Problems &amp; Dependency Indicators</b>						
Drinking/driving (self or with friend), 3+ times	9	14	19	12	18	18
Two or more problems from AOD use	9	13	18	15	21	22
Two or more dependency-related experiences	7	11	15	15	19	21
• Spent lot of time getting, using, being “hung over” from use	3	5	10	5	8	12
• AOD use often kept from school, working, activities or hobbies	2	4	9	4	7	10
• Attended counseling, program, or group to reduce/stop use	1	2	4	2	3	5
<b>Violence, Victimization, &amp; Safety</b>						
Carried a gun to school*	4	7	16	3	6	9
Been in a physical fight at school, 2+ times*	12	20	29	8	14	20
Current gang involvement	8	11	19	7	9	12
Any hate-crime harassment*	28	32	45	25	30	39
Been afraid of being beaten up at school, 2+ times*	8	9	14	5	7	11
Feel unsafe/very unsafe at school	7	9	16	6	8	10
<b>Social Supports &amp; Mental Health</b>						
Low in total school assets	20	25	26	24	21	20
Low in total community assets	11	16	20	19	15	17
Low in caring adult relationships in school	17	20	25	18	15	17
Low in caring adult relationships in community	11	15	19	15	14	16
Incapacitating sadness or hopelessness for 2 weeks or more*	30	41	44	33	44	45

\* in the past 12 months

PHY: live in a parent’s home (137,048 9th graders and 110,274 11th graders)

RHY: live in “other relative’s home” (5,122 9th and 4,240 11th)

FCY: live in foster home, group home, or awaiting placement (769 9th and 563 11th)

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